

STEVE COHEN
9TH DISTRICT, TENNESSEE
2104 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

TELEPHONE: (202) 225-3265
FAX: (202) 225-5663

167 NORTH MAIN STREET
SUITE 369
MEMPHIS, TN 38103

TELEPHONE: (901) 544-4131
FAX: (901) 544-4329

WWW.COHEN.HOUSE.GOV

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4209

November 6, 2019

The Honorable Bill Lee
Governor of the State of Tennessee
600 Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. Boulevard
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Governor Lee,

I am extremely disappointed to learn that Tennessee has not spent hundreds of millions of federal dollars to help Tennessee's low-income families. In the best interest of these people, I am writing to request further information about what is being done to help those in our state in dire need of support.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program gives states significant flexibility to use this federal funding in the most efficient and effective ways. According to the U.S. Census, Tennessee ranked tenth in the country for the highest poverty rate in 2018. When 15.3 percent of Tennesseans are living in poverty, it is inexcusable for the state to withhold millions of federal dollars allocated to help this exact population. At best, this has resulted in Tennessee's gross mismanagement of federal dollars; at worst, Tennessee has deliberately chosen not to assist needy families.

According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, in fiscal year (FY) 2018 Tennessee spent only \$21 million out of its \$190 million federal allocation on TANF programs. This means \$170 million in federal dollars went unspent last year alone. As a result, Tennessee has a documented total of \$571 million in unspent federal TANF dollars through FY 2018. The Beacon Center of Tennessee reported the unobligated federal TANF balance through FY 2019 at \$733 million.

In response to a recent article in *The Tennessean*, you were quoted as saying, "It'll [the unobligated federal TANF funds] be put to use when the needs are there for those who qualify. The Department is always looking at ways to serve that population better. That may require funds or not. But we're always looking." When Tennessee ranks in the top ten states with the highest poverty rate, it is too late to simply be looking.

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IN EUROPE (U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

I respectfully request answers to the following questions within 5 business days to help understand the state's reasoning behind these policy decisions:

- How many Tennessee families received assistance through federal TANF dollars from FY 2015 through FY 2018? How many are estimated to receive assistance in FY 2019?
 - How many families were eligible to receive assistance, but did not receive any benefits, from FY 2015 through FY 2019? How many families are eligible to receive assistance, but will not receive any benefits, in FY 2019?
- Please list and describe all state programs, including funding amounts, that received funding through the TANF grant and Families First from FY 2015 through FY 2018. Please list and describe all programs and estimated funding amounts for FY 2019.
- According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Tennessee's unobligated federal TANF balance was \$386 million in FY 2016, \$510 million in FY 2017, and \$571 million in FY 2018. The Beacon Center cites the unobligated federal TANF balance in FY 2019 at \$733 million. Please explain the specific reasons behind the increases in Tennessee's unobligated balance from FY 2016 through FY 2019.
- What is the state's plan for the current amount of unobligated federal TANF funding?
- According to the Congressional Research Service, Tennessee has one of the lowest maximum monthly TANF cash assistance benefit levels in the country at just \$185 for a single-parent family with two children. What factors are considered for Tennessee's TANF cash benefit amount?
 - How many families received the cash benefit from FY 2015 through FY 2018? How many families are expected to receive the benefit in FY 2019?
- According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Tennessee's reported expenditures on Basic Assistance programs in FY 2017 was \$61 million but dropped to \$18 million in FY 2018. The average number of families receiving Basic Assistance was relatively stable both years, though, with 27 million families served in FY 2017 and 23 million in FY 2018. Please explain in detail the state's reported drastic spending decline on Basic Assistance between FY 2017 and FY 2018.
 - What were the exact changes in benefits provided under the Basic Assistance program between FY 2017 and FY 2018?
- To what extent, if any, does the Families First program integrate and coordinate with other need-based programs in the state?
- What TANF support options are the state considering that would not require funding, per your comments in *The Tennessean*?

Thank you for your immediate attention. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

Cc: Congressman Jim Cooper, Tennessee's Fifth Congressional District
Ms. Danielle W. Barnes, Commissioner of Tennessee's Department of Human Services